



# A Human Future

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L'Arche Canada offers this "thought sheet" as a contribution to the public conversation about values and the shaping of the social ethos in which we live. Our perspective comes from two broad sources: (1) from thirty-five years of living together in community as a diverse group of people, differently abled and from various cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds; and (2) from contemporary thinkers who are open, fresh and responsive to the human spirit and are reflecting deeply on the individual and society today.

The vision and confidence to create a healthy Canadian society lies in the nexus where humanistic thinking and spirituality cross-fertilize. Indeed, today the best spiritual thinking engages contemporary culture with a view to the good of human society and the best humanistic thinking integrates spiritual values. We believe it is possible to live consciously in the gap between an ideal society and everyday reality and to make choices that contribute to the closing of that gap. It is a hopeful view, based on human and spiritual values embodied in daily life.

## *Altruism: Part One*

### An Interview with Dr. Pamela Cushing



Pamela Cushing is a cultural anthropologist. Her research includes health and disability studies, social inclusion, the politics of difference, and experiential education. She did post-doctoral research with Camphill Schools in Scotland and has done research with numerous other organizations (CACL, Roeher Institute, L'Arche, Laidlaw, Templeton and McConnell Family Foundations). She grew up in Montreal, and has lived in Europe, the U.S.A., and Togo. She and her husband, Jay, and their young son live in London, ON, where she teaches at King's College, University of Western Ontario.

*The expression of altruism in a society – particularly the extent of its concern for its disadvantaged citizens – is a measure of the quality of the society itself. This issue is the first of a two-part series in which cultural anthropologist, Professor Pamela Cushing explores that spirit of generosity that is fundamental to the kind of society we want to live in. Dr. Cushing did her doctoral research at L'Arche. Part Two will examine learnings from this research.*

A Human Future, is a free e-publication. We invite you to read back issues or to subscribe at [www.larche.ca](http://www.larche.ca). Beth Porter, ed.

#### **Beth Porter – What is altruism?**

**Pamela Cushing** – Common characterizations such as “giving without expectation of return,” make altruism seem binary, as if people are either saints or sinners. My research suggests that we need to use the term “altruism” carefully: that it is neither helpful nor accurate to think of altruism as a quality that either we have or don't have. We can learn more about human behaviour by exploring how altruistic impulses interact with other needs and desires. When

**“For some students, service is a galvanizing experience.”**

philosophers think about altruism they need to isolate it from its context to study the pure concept. I think that pure notion serves an analytic purpose but it is unreasonable to make it a gold standard that we hold people up to.

There's a long debate, beginning perhaps with Hobbes and Rousseau, over whether humans are basically selfish



## Bev Baker-Hofmann



*In 1994, an Edmonton neighbourhood was shocked by the brutal murder of a mother of young children by young offenders who had broken into their home. It was a loss of innocence for Edmonton. Despair, anger and pessimism were the dominant emotions, as many increased home security and lobbied for changes to the young offenders laws. Colleen, a Grade 2 teacher, chose in face of this to initiate a program called “Kids for Kindness” at her school – a response of optimism. Children sent special letters to bus drivers and school secretaries. A “kindness keeper” binder was set up for the children to record positive things that happened on the playground. A collection of the students’ thoughts on kindness was published. Children in the school and community began to feel empowered. Meanwhile, Colleen learned about the Random Acts of Kindness Week in some cities. With her sister Debbie and 13 others she helped establish the World Kindness Movement in 1997. They have since spent countless hours promoting it around the globe.*

Adapted from Bev Baker-Hofmann and Laurel Vespi, *Create a ripple: making a world of difference*. St Albert, AB, Making Waves Press, 2005.

or basically good. Evolutionary concepts like ‘the survival of the fittest’ seem to imply that altruism is a cultural anomaly, almost anti-progress. This has led some to assume that ancient peoples were not altruistic; that group survival was contingent on cutting off the elderly or injured. Emerging archaeological research, however, strongly suggests the longevity of altruism in humans. Ancient skeletons reveal evidence of major bone injuries that had healed before the person died, implying that someone was caring for the person during a dependent and likely unproductive time in their lives.

### How is altruism sustained?

We are by nature relational beings, so one thing people seek in their volunteer relationships is recognition or reward; but not of the financial or congratulatory sort. When Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes about the politics of recognition, he notes that moderns like us have an historically peculiar desire to become a unique individual self, and that we only feel fulfilled when that self is also recognized by others.

I watched Jean Vanier with L’Arche people who were talking about what they had learned from people with intellectual disabilities. With a big smile he suddenly said, “Do you know how revolutionary what you are saying is!” And each of them sat up a bit taller. His recognition was like saying, “I value you.”

With volunteers, it is easy to focus only on the urgent tasks at hand, and to forget that it’s special that people are willing to do these things. If an organization wants its volunteers to stay, it needs to be creative about forms of recognition.

### Does this reward or recognition dilute the altruism?

No – it may even strengthen it because it enables the giver to live it well. But this does not mean that recognition should be the primary motive. Giving, or helping, used to be the end point, whereas now many non-profits promote giving as a win-win proposition: you give something to get back something – good feelings, job skills, better resume. It’s a very seductive proposition. I don’t fault them since it obviously meets their



## Samuel Oliner & Pearl Oliner



*What distinguished rescuers was not their lack of concern with self, external approval, or achievement, but rather their capacity for extensive relationship – their stronger sense of attachment to others and their feeling of responsibility for the welfare of others, including those outside their immediate familial or communal circles... The help they extended to Jews was rarely the result of a perception of Jews as particularly worthy, but was rather a reflection of their characteristic way of determining moral values and actions...*

*Although no one developmental course inevitably produces an extensive person, we can provide a composite portrait from the significant differences that distinguish rescuers and non-rescuers.*

*It begins in close family relationships in which parents model caring behaviour and communicate caring values. Parental discipline tends toward leniency... It includes a heavy dose of reasoning... Dependability, responsibility and self-reliance are valued because they facilitate taking care of oneself as well as others. Failures are regarded as learning experiences...*

Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*, Toronto: MacMillan, 1988. pp 249–250.

needs in the short-term, but there are two dangers with that strategy. First, it conflates the motive and the reward, thereby changing the very nature of what is given. Although people often do feel good after serving others, this approach effectively makes the unexpected reward a requirement. Second, it creates the impression that giving or doing for others will always only feel good; that there will be little or no personal hardship. That's hardly ever the case with significant acts. For instance, during the Holocaust, an initial altruistic impulse to rescue someone might ultimately entail years of sacrifice for a whole family; sharing their little food, limiting visitors and noise and whatever could betray the hidden guest.

**Some academic programs now require service learning. Does this help cultivate altruism?**

It can go either way. Service learning is about both service and educational goals; the idea being to give students an opportunity to integrate class lessons while also thinking about how they want to live and what kind of person they want to be. The best service learning has this as an explicit objective.

I teach a large class on social justice where service learning is a key component. I try to help students strike a balance between the ideal and the pragmatics of addressing existing suffering that demands urgent action. We start with theories. I want them to understand structural injustice and to see that tactics like setting up food banks are interim, not long-term or dignified solutions; or that special agencies for people with disabilities wouldn't need to exist if we could change public attitudes towards disability. But then I want students to learn how hard it is to be a non-profit agency in the here and now, dealing with entrenched social and economic issues that cause people much suffering.

For some students, service can be a galvanizing experience, awakening a dormant gesture of giving in them. One of the key determinants for whether a person will volunteer is whether their parents did, so for students whose parents were not able

to model this, it can be an especially important first experience of service. For others, it's merely a perfunctory task that could even leave them more cynical about all volunteering if they feel underappreciated by the often over-worked service providers.

I find what is central is to recognize and acknowledge whatever impulse to altruism you do find in the students, as well as to model it yourself. Young people are quick detectors of insincerity.

#### Are there different levels of altruism?

Yes, in terms of frequency, commitment, degree of sacrifice, and cultural change achieved. Martin Luther King is an example of someone whose strong stand against white racism had an enormous legal and political impact on American policies. The core impulse in acts of altruism is the same – a desire to go beyond oneself to be and do for another, in particular the disadvantaged other. For King and Vanier the impulse is deeply spiritual, but in secular humanism this idea is also strong. Erik Erikson's model of life stages illustrates this well, where the penultimate level, called "generativity," is when what you do with your life is for others. You are not expecting something back. A mature parent or friend is able to do that.



*The L'Arche movement was founded by Jean Vanier, in France in 1964. Today there are 134 communities of L'Arche on six continents, 28 in Canada. In L'Arche, people with developmental disabilities and those who come to assist them share life together.*

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## FOR YOUR INTEREST

### The Most Charitable

For the seventh year in a row, Nunavut's charitable donors were more generous than those in any other province or territory in Canada. Lorne Kusugak, mayor of Rankin Inlet said, "The Inuit have always given. They lived a nomadic life where they had to help each other to survive. The fittest would help those who are not as fortunate, and that tradition has carried on today.... We don't have a lot of rich people, and it costs a lot of money to live here – a pound of butter costs five bucks – but people find a way to take \$20 or \$40 out of their pay cheque and give to charity of some sort.

Extracted from Joe Friesen, "The Most Charitable" in Philanthropy special, *The Globe and Mail*, p. A14, Nov. 2, 2007

- Imagine Canada (2007) Nonprofits Can! Resources on research and tools. [www.nonprofitscan.ca/](http://www.nonprofitscan.ca/)
- The Altruistic Personality and Prosocial Behavior Institute  
Founder/Director: Samuel P. Oliner; Research Director: Pearl M. Oliner. [www.humboldt.edu/~altruism/home.html](http://www.humboldt.edu/~altruism/home.html)
- Pamela Cushing, "(Story) Telling it like it is: How Narratives Teach," in *Unfitting Stories: Narrative Approaches to Disease, Disability and Trauma*. Editors: Valerie Raoul, C. Canam, A. Henderson, C. Paterson. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press; ch. 17, 2007.
- Robert Wuthnow, *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991. Review: [Click here](#).
- Bev Baker-Hofmann, an educational psychologist, consults with schools in the area of special education, is an associate with Integra Leadership, and has an independent coaching practice: [www.bbhcoaching.ca](http://www.bbhcoaching.ca)

### NEW

L'Arche Items, obtainable from [pubs@larchedaybreak.com](mailto:pubs@larchedaybreak.com):

- *Choosing Our Future: Senior Students in Conversation with Jean Vanier* (17 min. DVD contains also the *On Becoming Human* curriculum for Grades 11 and 12).
- Jean Vanier, *Our Life Together: A Memoir in Letters* (HarperCollins).

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